

2002 2004

creative writing



(poetry, fiction, sporty, jest)

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An Old English poet or minstrel

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Awards

Poetry Award	A Chic and A Boom, I Called Him Teddy Bear <i>by Victoria Hasenauer</i>
Poetry Honorable Mention	Bitter Biddies <i>by Janet Banks</i>
Poetry Honorable Mention	Girl <i>by Amanda Keithley</i>
Fiction Award	Entwined In A Lack of Kindling <i>by Victoria Hasenauer</i>
Fiction Honorable Mention	The Reason <i>by Seyko Bond</i>
Nonfiction Award	The Reading G-A-M-E <i>by Lauren Lewandowski</i>
Nonfiction Honorable Mention	Freedom <i>by Matt Esquibel</i>

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From the Editor

Creative writing can be therapeutic and relaxing, but it can also be scary. Submitting one's written creations to a publication for acceptance or rejection can be one of the most frightening experiences a writer faces. After spending hours putting imaginative and often personal thoughts on paper, a writer must then turn over his work to an editor and hope that the editor "gets it."

The entries that SCOP received this year were outstanding, making it difficult at times to choose the final selections. The SCOP staff would like to thank all who took a creative risk and submitted their work for consideration. By taking an artistic chance, you helped make this edition of SCOP one of the best ones yet.

I would also like to thank my fellow editors who helped make some difficult decisions, our faculty advisor, Mr. Stanley E. Banks, who gave needed advice, and graphic designer, Debbie Seigler, who completed the "look" of SCOP with her artistic eye.

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of SCOP as much as we enjoyed putting it together. Thank you to everyone who supported SCOP this year, and congratulations to this year's award winners. We are proud to publish your work.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Morris". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Amy" and "Morris" being capitalized and prominent.

Amy Morris
Editor-in-Chief
SCOP, 2004

Table of Contents

Awards
Sponsor
Editorial Staff
From The Editor

Non-fiction

Freedom	3
An E-mail Excerpt	8
A Soldier's Story	9
Hypocrisy in Female Penitentiaries	11
What Women's Studies Means To Me	16
The Reading G-a-m-e	18

Poetry

To Ayla	25
A Chic and A Boom, I Called Him Teddy Bear	26
Maybe It Wouldn't Want Me	29
In Jail My Bunky Was Diane	30
Yours Truly	33
Bitter Biddies	35
Summer's Last Soiree	36
A Season Of	37
Pillar of Strength	38
Girl	39
Thunderstorm	40
Three Broken Hearted Fools	41
The Hive	42
Stoned	43

Table of Contents

Instrumental Orgasm	44
Mom's Shopping List	45
The Empty Face	46
So You Want To Be A Teacher	48
The Death of a Child	49
Missing You	50
Erika	51

Fiction

The Reason	55
The First Dance	59
Grandpa's Damsel	60
The Spray	64
She's Gone	72
Entwined In a Lack of Kindling	73

Drama

Greenthumb	77
------------------	----

non-fiction



Freedom

Throughout my life and as I have grown, my physical boundaries and borders have been reshaped, reformed and sometimes completely blown away. Strict rules have been placed on me. With time they have loosened, and since being on my own living the college life, I sometimes feel that my rules have vanished. You might say that I have been liberated or freed, or that the chain of curfews and groundings, lectures and discipline has been instantly snapped, sending me into a new world of woo-hoo! I would argue that the freedom was always there, never changed, never bound or regulated because the freedom of my mind, spirit, and soul comes from within. It can only grow and not be limited. Fueled by experience, my freedom will grow faster than any boundary can be laid.

When looking back, I think about those special times when my freedom has reached its maximum velocity of development. Those special memories I recall always bring a smile along with a feeling of astonishment and the soothing thought of, "Wow, that was great." One such memory was that of a weeklong vacation to Cancun, Mexico. I took with me my best friend during the summer before college. The vacation has since been coined, "The best time of our lives!" And it was.

For those who have not been, Cancun is a magical place. Despite the tales of alcohol and sex, both very much a part of Cancun life, it was a place for my friend and me to find ourselves, find our freedom. Don't get me wrong; the trip was jam-packed with the fun stuff. At least I think it was, but it was also filled with long sits on the beach, where the waves crashing and the stars shining would bring out the deepest thoughts about myself, others and life. It was then I was liberated; it was then I was unbound, and it was then I was allowed to feel the glory of true freedom.

The trip began hours before sunrise on a warm midsummer morning in small-town Rolla, Missouri. In the darkness we packed, our eyes half shut and our smiles lighting up the room. The excitement overwhelmed us, my mother, sister, best friend (Adam) and me. As we tossed the clothes, toiletries, cologne and Trojans into our bags, we could already smell the wave-laden beach, hear the riot of the clubs, feel the deep, almost hypnotic

relaxation of the pool coupled with a margarita, and we could see, man could we see, the girls, dozens, thousands, all there for the same reason, fun. We knew they would just love to involve a couple of soon-to-be college freshmen like Adam and me in their fun. We couldn't wait, so we zipped our bags, walked out the door and sped away from the small town we so needed to escape.

The party began illegally on the way to the airport. A bottle of Jack was twisted open, and guided by the light of a seven-in-the-morning sunrise, it was mixed strongly with coke in a smallish cup. By smallish I mean little, or not that big. I mean the cup could have been bigger, but not much because then it would have been huge! The definition of alcoholism was a distant cry in our minds, and what did it matter; we had left the world of definitions. How do you say that in Spanish? No hablo Espanol, muy paquito. The more we spoke to our new buddy Jack, the more we seemed to remember, or maybe it just sounded like it.

The first plane ride was surprisingly a blur; all I know is that I woke up in New Jersey. It was a nice, different airport very similar to a new mall, stores and all. The map had told us that New Jersey was really out of the way. We agreed until we realized that the cheapest way is not always the fastest, so we felt a little out of place changing planes, wearing the most obnoxious Hawaiian tourists' shirts we could find. We were not informed that New Jersey airport style was slightly less casual. Of course we didn't care. We were on our way to the happiest place on earth, and besides, flip-flops are a whole lot easier to check for knives and such, and we were not about to let airport security slow us down.

The second and final plane ride would be significantly more eventful than the first. It was on this ride where the soul searching began. The enlightenment was sparked by Adam and my neighbor on the sardine-packed jetliner. At first glance we were sitting next to a twenty-something year old, shaved head punk who stole the window seat. When conversation arose about mid-flight we were greatly surprised; however, we were not wrong.

Chitchat began, you know, small talk, the weather, the cramped discomfort of the plane paired with the bland taste of the mid-flight micro-

meal, the crazy destination. The chitchat blossomed into an in-depth conversation, and personal information was exchanged. "What's your name? I'm Matt, this is Adam. You?"

"My name is Mohk," Mark pronounced in his heavy British accent.

The conversation continued almost robotically. Where you from? Where's that? England, that's cool. Small town, that must suck. Sure does. Why are you going to Cancun? Why not? Naturally. We continued to learn more about each other. After about an hour of rigorous exchange, we gathered an overabundance of information about Mark. He had a rather impressive resume. He had been a guitarist for a punk rock band called Souls de Silencia. He had previously been married to a former European playmate of the year, and with whom he had a child, and he was a Buddhist Lama. Buddhist Lama! "Are you serious?" Adam and I skeptically replied. We were in the presence of greatness. Mark the Monk, as he is called by his friends, was not just any lama; he was apparently the Dalai Lama's right hand man. It turned out that Mark was one of the most important people in the Buddhist religion today. "You're kidding me?"

"Nope."

Adam and I shared a long, drawn-out, astonished "Wow! That is aaawesome!"

What were the chances we would be sitting next to Mark, the guitar playing, playmate marrying monk. He began telling us stories of previous lives and the things he had done in their duration, passages he had written and his importance in the religion. Adam and I were extremely skeptical. It did sound like a pretty tall tale. Mark the Monk, as his new best friends were now calling him, acknowledged our disbelief and opted to bring out evidence, proof.

He brought to the attention of his two-man jury exhibit A, a book. Okay, fine, a book, "Something Buddhist Something" I think it was called. No big deal and certainly not yet proof. Let's look inside. Mark flipped through a few pages and then stopped. He then raised his head and gave us the "I told you so" glance; one eyebrow raised and a rather self-satisfied smirk. While he looked at us, we glanced down at the book and saw a photo of him, a good picture I might add. He was quite photogenic. On the adjacent

(previous) page was a picture of the Dalai Lama himself, much older and wearing those unmistakable glasses. There they were, our new friend Mark and the Dalai Lama placed side by side in a Buddhist book. Exhibit A was convincing enough. The jury was ready to reach a verdict, but Mark continued strongly with his litigation.

Enter exhibit B, another book, but this appeared to be a journal. It was smaller and looked pretty old. In it was hand written entries, however, it was not written in English. Mark told us that he had written these passages in Tibetan. Exhibit C, Mark reads and writes Tibetan. We had him recite a few lines, and then we had him translate. We were amazed. The verdict was in, Mark's a monk!

An amazing, life-changing conversation ensued. Mark explained the intricacies of the remarkable Buddhist religion while Adam and I listened, interjecting a question here and there. He told us how he was selected by himself, in a previous life, to carry on his legacy. He told us that he already knew when, where and who he would be in his next life, but much to our disappointment, he did not disclose that information to us. He told of some memories he had from previous lives, burning to death was the most memorable for him and me. He told us about karma and the middle road; if you give a dollar you'll get a dollar, and if you take a dollar you will lose a dollar. Reincarnation, reading auras, karma, and the whole of the religion all seemed extremely farfetched, but when thinking about a book written two thousand years ago by men guided by an all knowing, omnipresent being, I guess it is just as worthy a religion when you step back and think about it. Mark told us about his experiences with the Dalai Lama and how cool of a person this man is.

We learned that many Buddhists drink, swear, and have sex all without consequence. Who cares and what does it matter in the grand scheme of things? They're not bad, they are just living their lives to the fullest with no more than they need, and that's what Adam and I learned from this man. As we departed the plane, Adam and I both felt a sense of enlightenment; we felt calm, and our perspective on life had completely changed.

Well, we had arrived and it was time to do what we came there to do, party. So we did, all night, every night, and then we would party all day every day. There were clubs, alcohol, girls and more girls. Everyone was there for the same reason, and we were free to do whatever we wanted, when we wanted, apart from urinating in public. That almost got me arrested. At the end of the night, we would go out to the beach, sometimes together, sometimes alone. Sometimes I'd sit, other times I would march the beach. When I was out there, absorbing the peacefulness of the crashing waves on an empty beach, I would think about the night, the previous night, the previous week, month, year, and the previous eighteen years of my life. I looked back on my life through my new eyes given to me from a monk on an airplane. I was changed. I was free. When the sun rose, we left the beach and went to eat breakfast. Then it was bedtime. Several hours later we would start the process over, and we repeated it for seven days straight.

We slept the whole way home, through ten hours of flying and three hours of driving. When we got home, we slept for two days, waking only to use the restroom, or watch a minute or two of television. Three days later, after finally sobering up, I got a chance to look back on that experience and think about how I had changed from it, what I had learned and how through my new perspective I had been freed.

An E-Mail Excerpt

(Sent Home by an Avila Student Visiting Scotland)

When we drove out of Edinburgh, it was a typical Scottish day – as in a lot of mist and cool, but not freezing. The mist was so bad at one point that you could barely see beyond the end of the concrete on the side of the road. It was so thick you could actually see strands of mist parting in front of the coach. We continued to drive through it anyway, and the first place that we headed to was the William Wallace Monument. By the time we got there, the fog had cleared a little, but not much. We could see maybe 20 feet up, and then there was just a layer of mist hanging over the mountains. The William Wallace Monument is actually a castle with a museum in it. It sits at the top of a rather large and steep hill that is covered in trees and has only a small, steep path to the top. As a group, we didn't really have the desire or the time to do the whole museum and our guide, Laura, had already told us the history of Wallace, so we climbed up the path just to see if we could get a good view. It turned out that the mist was no better the further up we went, so basically, we just got in some good exercise. It was still a cool start to the day. They also had a really horrible carving there of Mel Gibson from Braveheart. It was pretty bad. It made him look kind of squashed down and angry. It was funny because at the bottom of the carving was the word "freedom," but every night when it got dark, the carving had to be locked up behind a steel cage. If it wasn't, local high school boys would spray paint graffiti on it. We laughed when Laura told us that story.

A Soldier's Story

The movie *A Soldier's Story*, directed by Norman Jewison and produced by Chiz Schultz, opens in a small southern town with a clearly inebriated sergeant stumbling back towards his base. As the sergeant nears his destination, he is detained and murdered. Moments before the trigger is pulled, the sergeant utters these fateful words, "They will always hate you." So begins a thrilling murder mystery in which multitudes of suspects are investigated through thickening racial tension. Jewison weaves a masterful tale that centers around that fateful utterance, "They will always hate you," and how the meaning of that line adapts throughout the movie to mean many different things.

The line, at the time of the murder, seems to be directed toward the person who held the gun. Considering the character and the setting of the movie, a sergeant in the Deep South during World War II, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that some white man decided he couldn't stand a black man as a non-commissioned officer. Hence the reference being that black men will always hate the white man for the oppression that they have been forced to endure. Adding to the implication of racial violence, the director introduces us to the investigating officer, a black officer by the name of Davenport.

Davenport begins his investigation of the incident by questioning the men under Sgt. Watter's command. As the questioning of Pvt. Wilcox progresses, the finger of guilt, due to the context of the statement, shifts from some anonymous white man to the private. This rationale becomes clear as it is revealed that the private was the sergeant's errand boy, aiding the sergeant in all the dirty tasks that he wanted done. These deeds included, after the shooting on the base, placing the gun under the cot of CJ Memphis to implicate him as the shooter because Sgt. Watters had wanted to teach CJ a lesson. Wilcox's motivation for killing Watters came more into focus during the second round of questioning when Davenport forced Wilcox into revealing that he truly hated Sgt. Watters. Once that

connection was made, it is easy to see how, since no one likes a kiss-ass, that statement could and did apply to Wilcox.

At this point, the water that is this mystery thickens into a murky sludge until Davenport discovers the true identity of the murderers. The question is why would these individuals hate Sgt. Watters? I was unable to come up with a reason, yet, as the movie flashes back to the night of the murder and we see the rest of the dialogue that leads up to the statement, "They will always hate you," Jewison reveals what might have been the true meaning behind that statement.

Through the sergeant's confession, the fog of obscurity parts to reveal that the sergeant wasn't speaking to his killer that night and that the statement has nothing to do with the person holding the gun at all. Rather, the statement is a shameful lament to white America, who, no matter how hard he tried, wouldn't accept him because of the color of his skin.

In the end, regardless of the person that Sgt. Watters was, and he wasn't a good one, I felt nothing but pity for a man who could never be what he wanted to be. More accurately, I hated the fact that he would never be seen as anything more than a black man. Rather than take pride in what he had been able to accomplish, he chose a negative view about what he couldn't accomplish because of his skin, a reflection that is proven false after Watters's death by the presence of Davenport, a black officer.

Hypocrisy in Female Penitentiaries

Brandy did not have any childhood living with a physically abusive stepfather and an alcoholic mother. Brandy fell in love with a drug dealer who provided her with illegal drugs. One night, the cops raided Brandy and her boyfriend's apartment. Both of them were arrested and sentenced to three years in prison. Brandy expected her life in prison to entail a lot of physical labor, cleaning, and some harsh words from the prisoners and the prison guards. She knew that a lot of her basic rights would be stripped from her. She knew she would not have control over what she ate, when she showered or used the toilet, or what time she would go to bed. Brandy did not, however, imagine that routine pat searches by male guards would turn into excuses to fondle her breasts, buttocks and vagina. She did not know that male guards would watch her as she showered and used the toilet. She did not think that guards would show up in her cell at night to molest and rape her. She did not know all this would be a part of her sentence, but it was.

Brandy experienced a major problem in the penitentiary system that thousands of female inmates are victims of. This problem is with male guards taking advantage of female prisoner's bodies. Search areas, cells, and shower and toilet facilities are areas where male guards frequently abuse female prisoners. Pat searches are necessary to keep prisons safe and in order by ensuring no prisoners are hiding drugs or weapons that could cause harm to the prisoner or others in the prison. It is also necessary for guards to be in the shower and toilet facilities to ensure the safety of all the prisoners in case a conflict occurs. However, when a male guard uses pat searches as an excuse to "feel-up" an inmate in a manner that is not professional, or when they gawk at naked inmates in the shower, then prisoners suffer. A study conducted by Human Right's Watch in female prisons in California, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, New York, and the District of Columbia found:

...that male officers vaginally, anally, and orally raped and sexually assaulted and abused female prisoners. They used mandatory pat-

frisks to grope women's breasts, buttocks, and vaginal areas, view them inappropriately while in a state of undress, and engage in constant verbal harassment of female prisoners, contributing to a custodial environment that was often hostile and highly sexualized. (HRW)

Sexual abuse is not an acceptable way to treat prisoners and something should be done to prevent such abuse.

Measures should be taken to end sexual abuse which includes, "sexual assault and threatened sexual assault; sexual contact; and sexually explicit language and gestures" (AI). All male guards should be taken out of situations which could result in an invasion of female prisoners' privacy. Prohibit all sexual contact between guards and inmates, whether it is consensual or not. Allow only female guards to perform pat searches and guard duty in the shower and toilet areas, but have male guards near by in case a lot of physical restraint is needed. Prisoners should be informed that any and all sexual abuse is not to be tolerated, and they have the right to speak up for themselves. If this plan is not possible then, at minimum, there should be a rape and sexual abuse hotline made available to the prisoners that is controlled by an agency separate from the prison . This agency should take all allegations seriously and therefore conduct thorough and unbiased investigations of all allegations of sexual assault.

One argument against the plan to take out male guards from privacy situations could be the number of female guards available. Prison guard is not a traditional profession many women go into. According to the Federal bureau of Prisons, there are 103 institutions (not specified as male or female or both). Throughout these prisons, there are 9,603 female staff members employed, which is 28.3% of the total prison staff population (FBOP). The numbers of female staff compared to the number of institutions shows there could be 93 female staff members at each facility, an ample number to perform all the pat searches and shower guard duties. This would increase the privacy of female inmates as well as decrease the amount of sexual abuse occurrences between male guards and the inmates.

If taking male guards out of privacy situations is not a possibility then the rape and sexual abuse hotline should be implemented. An obstacle in the way of this plan is criminals are generally judged as dishonest people, so there would be no reason for anyone to believe a female prisoner's allegations of sexual abuse against a guard's sworn honesty. If an inmate is sexually abused, it is her word against the guard's. In an article by Ginger Adams Otis, writer for "Women's E News," she says:

As Department of Correctional Services regulations exist now, an inmate's word is not enough to convince authorities to investigate allegations of sexual abuse, nor is the word of a second inmate. A Department of Correctional Services guard or staff person has to come forward and corroborate the story, and you can imagine how often that happens. (Otis)

Wardens and other law officials are more willing to believe guards than prisoners. However, there have been cases where women have complained about sexual abuse and were accused of lying, but they were able to prove a male guard had abused them. For instance, Lucy Amador, an ex-inmate of Albion Correctional Facility in upstate New York, claimed she had been forced to perform oral sex on one of the guards multiple times, but he always made her clean up any evidence. She complained multiple times to the warden and even the governor, but no action was taken. On one occasion after performing oral sex, "Amador's attacker left a small stain of semen on her shirt sleeve and, after much pressure from prisoner's rights groups, the stain was tested" (Otis). The guard was fired and sentenced to jail. Had there been a hotline available to Amador, she would have been able to talk to professionals who would listen to and help her. Had the guard had no opportunity to be alone with Amador, she would not have been sexually abused.

Even if inmates do not lie and there are enough female guards to cover pat searches and bathroom/shower facilities, prisoners should not be allowed any rights. These women broke the law. Even though these women broke the law, they still have basic human rights such as simple privacy of the body. According to Black's Law Dictionary, "Invasion of

privacy is the unwarranted appropriation or wrongful intrusion into one's private activities, in such a manner as to cause mental suffering, shame, or humiliation to a person of ordinary sensibilities" (Black 424). With the status quo, inmates have to deal with a constant invasion of privacy. With this definition of privacy, it can be argued that a prisoner is not a "person of ordinary sensibilities" because they broke the law. However, according to Amnesty International, the United States has ratified Article 10 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which states, "All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person" (AI). In Article 17 of the ICCPR it says, "Everyone should have the right to privacy without arbitrary interference" (AI). The United States has ratified these articles, yet they are disregarded everyday. The act of rape, sexual assault and abuse, and voyeurism does not respect the inherent dignity of the human person nor does it respect privacy. Guards who partake in such violations are breaking the law and should be treated like criminals. However, if these male guards were taken away from situations that could lead to sexual abuse, they would not have many opportunities to abuse the inmates, thus the plan for removing male guards from privacy situations should be enacted.

Women in prison need structure in their lives. Going to prison is supposed to teach a criminal not to break the law. However, it is difficult to learn that lesson when inside the correctional facility, the people who are supposed to teach the prisoners constantly break the law themselves by sexually abusing the prisoners. No one deserves to be sexually assaulted, raped, or tortured no matter what his or her crime is. This hypocrisy of the female prison system could easily be avoided if, optimally, male guards were removed from the situations that tempt them and if there was no tolerance for any kind of sexual behavior in correctional facilities, or at a minimum, a rape and abuse hotline was available to prisoners.

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What Women's Studies Means To Me

As a young lad growing up in a village in central Kenya, I experienced a cultural patrimony that did not hold women to a very high esteem. My own mother never got a chance to get a formal education due to the idiosyncrasy that continues to persist when it comes to equal opportunities. I recall how aghast I was when I first learned that my mother could not read or write. It never occurred to me that my own mother was illiterate because I always thought that she knew everything. I will never know what my mother would have become if she had the opportunity to go to school.

Growing up in a family of six sisters and four brothers was a lot of jollity. However, I couldn't help but notice the differences in the kinds of treatment that we received. My native country has come a long way in improving the treatment of its women. Just like with racism, discrimination against women in most cultures is rooted in deeply-held traditions. Most of those traditions are in favor of men and are designed to keep women from enjoying commensurate opportunities as men and pursuing their own self-determination.

As a political science major, Women's Studies is a course that is hypercritical to my career trajectory. The contention to win women freedom and liberation must not only be championed by the women themselves, but must also focus on changing the hearts and minds of morbid traditionalists who are resolute to maintain the status quo. The idea of subjugating women in the name of customs and traditions runs counter to the idea of development. Women in my native country, as is the case around the world, are the vertebrae of the community. It is not a waste of resources when girls get the same opportunities as boys. The real waste of resources is when communities deny an entire generation of women the opportunity to contribute their talents. It is indeed ridiculous that the same oppressed women are counted upon to raise children and take care of their families and households but get no recognition for their contributions.

Women's Studies to me means a deviant way of thinking as far as women's issues are concerned. Women's issues are society's issues because they encompass aspects of all our lives. It is not about equality

but equal opportunity. Women the world over want to partake and contribute to the common good. As a man who grew up in a community that values traditions, Women's Studies provides me with a different approach to those values. Women's Studies should be a requirement for all graduating college students. Many people, especially men, are simply unenlightened about the importance of women and their contributions to our human society. The more men learn about women's worth and dignity, the more they can appreciate their talents and contributions.

For the sake of my mother, whom I love and adore, and for the sake of my six sisters who are bright and talented, Women's Studies was a natural choice for me. As a future aspiring politician, becoming cognizant in issues important to women is an important aspect of my overall augmentation and development as a well-rounded public servant. It is my hope and dream that one day, I will return to my native village and help change the way of thinking. It is not in anyone's best interest to hold a group of people down in the name of traditions. It is perfectly okay to discard antiquated traditions and embrace new ideas. I have read extensively about women who have achieved great feats, and I have always wondered how the world would be today if those women were denied a chance to find themselves. It is then that I think about my mother and millions of other women in Africa and around the world who never had a chance. For me, Women's Studies is just the dawning of a journey aimed at changing a paradigm that has proven too expensive to maintain.

The problems facing Africa are many. Some are no one's fault, but others can be blamed directly on the people. The days of devaluing women are quickly coming to an end. I want to be a part of that radical group that is willing to challenge this social construction and hopefully change behavior. Women's Studies for me represents an excursion into a sensitive area that has resisted change over the years and whose implications could be wide and far-reaching. As African women and other women all around the world come out of the woodwork and demand equal treatment, I want to be counted among those who say, "It's about time."

Dedicated to my mother, Ruth Wanjiku Muturi
And all the women of the world

The Reading G-a-m-e

Reading, for me, started at age three. Sitting in my old house with my mom and staring at the small black words and colorful pictures of a thin square book, I said, "I'm gonna read this book, Mom."

Mom smiled.

The first word I recognized was "not." I don't remember learning the letters, just looking at the letters n-o-t and realizing what they spelled. After that, I became frustrated with any word I couldn't read, like u-n-d-e-r, "What a funny lookin' word."

I looked at the word and the pictures on the page, and a game began that I still play today, the context game. The three billy goats stood on the bridge with no idea that the evil troll was under them, u-n-d-e-r, under. Ah-hah! Reading was a game in which the story was the prize. After I read all my Little Golden Books, I read the entire Sesame Street Library--big business for a little gal.

Interestingly, because I started playing the reading game so often, I started to catch on to my parents' games. Theirs was the, "Let's p-e-l-l it out so the kids won't know what we're talking about game." P-double-o-l meant we were going swimming. I was so on to them. My parents had this whole world of information that I could get in on, if I could read. I found that in my child-sized world, life could be very frustrating. My parents were always saying things like, "We're grownups. We know better." Aagghh! My little brain started buzzing with ideas, reading is power and I'm going to know better than you! For example, I sat studying the Lucky Charms box as I ate my breakfast one morning. Mom flexed her grown-up knowledge, "You need to eat all the cereal Lauren. You can't just eat the marshmallows and leave the healthy stuff."

"But look Mom, it says right here, nine essential vitamins and minerals. The marshmallows are good for you," (I rest my case).

The realization started to set in that the more words I knew, the more things I learned, and I could become that much smarter than grown-ups. Bring on the big guns. I wanted HUGE words, like the ones on the milk

carton label "homogenized," "Mom what's homogenized?"

"Um, well..."

"Dad, what's the biggest word you know?"

"Antidisestablishmentarianism," Mm-hmm, that's what I'm talking about. I couldn't add or subtract to save my life, but I was getting good at that reading game, "Check it out! Lauren can read her book upside down!" Mrs. Gonzalez's kindergarten class was wowed.

Reading started as a challenge, a game. In a way it still is both of those things, yet the stakes have changed. As a child, reading and understanding something labeled as difficult was like riding my bike all the way from my house to Topsy's and the Brookside Dime Store, tough but rewarding. Then, the challenge turned into a quest for knowledge that would make me more grown-up and give me some validity in the world of adults. As a child, I decided what was hard, what my challenges would be. Now, instead of figuring out what will happen to the three billy goats and the troll, I'm trying to digest John Donne and clase de Espanol. Instead of selecting books from the shelves of the 75th Street Kansas City Public Library, teachers (with Ph.D.'s) present me with lists of books and authors and unconjugated Spanish verbs that are my challenges. "Lauren, quieres una burro burguesa?"

"Gracias, pero no."

The stakes have definitely changed. I still read because I want to and because learning something makes me feel a little bit more powerful. However, now I see an awesome prize looming in the distance. This prize has a gold seal on it and my name in black scrolled lettering. The biggest word on this prize reads "Baccalaureate" (couldn't spell that when I was five). A university is going to give me a prize for doing what I've been doing since I was three, reading and regurgitating the knowledge. My Literary Criticism teacher wants me to say it's more than that and it is, but I don't know if I'm ready to find out what the next level is in this "game." Maybe I'll write down some of the ideas swimming around in my head and end up on a best (or worst) seller list someday. We'll see.

I think it was a good habit I started back then, looking at words and contexts and figuring out their meanings. Who would have thought? And,

(I know, never start with "and") though I don't know exactly what I want to do with my English degree yet, I am already reaping its benefits. I may never be a teacher or a famous writer, but I can help my little sister with her English homework. While that may seem like a small thing, it's big to me. I can take my knowledge and help someone else, and that makes all of this seem worthwhile, "*Young Goodman Brown*. Sure sis, I read that. Hawthorne was alluding to the unpardonable sin. That means looking into the hearts of others and..."



poetry



To Ayla

A daughter

Inquisitive, tireless

Questioning, seeking, searching

Ceaseless in her quest for knowledge

Answering, explaining, solving

Exhausted, happy

A mother

A Chic and A Boom, I Called Him Teddy Bear

Throughout our marriage
he thought of me as his erotic white hope
He'd say, "your butt is so beautiful."

He'd ask me to rub his precious stone.
Fixed on displeasure submerged
in his self, I was forced

to save him somehow because I was sympathetic.
I know at least I tried until death of the spirit.
I tried to rekindle a completeness.

My temptable nerves ignited.
The pluckiest heat ruffled cold branches.
A chic and a boom

I melted him with my peachy touch
into the frozen bedroom
where hostilities still lurked

ready to crack
to pour rushing indignation from under ice.
I called him teddy bear, he liked that

but I thought squirrel; his long gray tail,
his overgrown toenails, his rudimentary
cha-cha-cha from between buck teeth,

his cheeks filled with little brown nuts
and his yak heaving for air;

yak
yak
yak...

It was awful
so I would chatter back
to get his mind off the choke.

Nevertheless we swung from steely sheets,
he gathered my skin for next season's meal,
we strangled goose feathers in a pillow fight song.

But I made the mistake and I
rolled the rattlesnake's tail
back under the stone.

It must have been a momentum from his early days.
Plumage unfurled from the rattle.
I saw wings of the beast

and a narrow beam exposed my husband.
I could see him clearly then.
Still I prostituted;

loving without loving
and we soared the pimping dawn
drinking primitive juice and red sky

because the devil took us right then
right there blushing
as our once-civilized tree house rocked.

It streaked into free-swimming rays of a dismal reflection;
a marriage gone sour,
a marriage that never existed at all.

I kissed him good-bye with divorce.
He ran for his hole claiming I would fleece him
and hang him on the wall of my cabin.

A chic and a boom
I called him teddy bear
but I thought squirrel.

Maybe It Wouldn't Want Me

I was loudly waiting in my disease
and noise pollution
that would penetrate me more extremely
than it already had wildly
and then
something
came as a sensational surprise;

everything became still.
I was so startled in the quietude
that its sharp energy became uncomfortable
and from there I noticed
the morning purple like poet My wrote about

in a senseless desert;
no wind
no thoughts an outcry.
Only then I also became aware of
a lone spot in the blank blue sky,
the sun's white rumor spiking the horizon with bright orange first
and the Joshua's whispering
"look at us" but not actually saying anything.

I noticed myself
that I had maybe one last chance
while lacking delicacy of spirit
to be patient in the quiet
or else
maybe it wouldn't want me,
maybe it would make the ascent
past singing tones and shadowed courage without me.

In Jail My Bunky Was Diane

Learning the hard way is a mythical well being.
Free apprehension behind bars
walks on air in its downpour cry out.
Lonely felicity wallowing.

In jail my bunky was Diane.
She'd accumulated in and out
and out of bliss
back again for crack borrowing Christ's

Scripture for robbery
but mostly assault
and mostly I could somehow
relate to her,
(without ever actually assaulting anybody).
Do I wish I actually did?

Diane was drunk
coked
zoned out
when her 280-pound boyfriend
rejoicing his fifteen day binge of barbiturates and booze
boiled into her agitated given.

"No shit" I said.
"What happened?"
"Where the hell is everybody getting all the crack?"
All I heard was barely credible
mythical well being.
"We sure as fuck want it."
Want it fabulous.

I asked about crack, not because I wanted
to smoke the collapse,
two volcanic drinks on my meds
would cause me a crock up scissure.

So I got 200 milligrams of second chance
XANAX sustenance
for the alligator within

for my quipping sally.
I raised my kid's impressions for 22 years
and I worked a similar endurance in a USDA office for 23.
My 21 year old broke the high spirit

of natural blessings, he graduated
borrowing chronic smiles
congratulating himself every day since he was 12 years old

every direction a season of marijuana.
Nobody wonders why
he's spilling over with a whoop.

My bunky Diane hung with gangbangers in Compton
most all her life.
I loved her in a weird show-me-
how I can be protected.
"Just keep your mouth shut!"

She was feared.
She liked to read books.
She was triumph denied,
half Persian, half black,
grew up slumming.
She had eleven children all adopted.

When she gets done with her sentence
she'll apply at rehab since
she knows the ropes.
She'll counsel the noise.

Lopsided, Diane
grabbed a hammer from the drawer
and she loved her boyfriend with it.
The skin from her thigh and forehead
were gloves for his fists.

Heads crack open ecstatic.
Transferred to Chico from Los Angeles Twin Towers
we'll write each other

out every little hole and pore in our skin,
straight out our skulls and pop
into a very large mellow.

When you cover your face with one thin blanket
that you sleep with in order to keep
the heat in

freezing
lying on a thin mat, the deputy says
"You're not supposed to like it in jail,
so that you won't come back"

and the laughter rises
skips, slips on the spotted stains
of surprising terror.

Yours Truly

I wish I had an explanation,
For the situation that we're in,
And I wish that I could say for sure,
That you won't be hurt again.

But because I cannot promise,
That there won't be pain involved,
I am certain that our problem,
Cannot easily be solved.

We could've just escaped this all,
By not addressing how we felt,
But we can't turn back the hands of time,
Nor change the cards that we've been dealt.

We can't take back the words we said,
Or the trust we chose to give,
And now we're faced with the consequences,
Of allowing our feelings to live.

We're faced with the fact that love is hard,
And that lovers can't pretend,
When there's an emotion felt that runs so deep,
And that depth never seems to end.

When thoughts of you flood my mind,
And I am restless through the night,
I am faced with the question that if this had to end,
Would I really be all right?

Would I have the strength that it truly takes,
To let a man like you just go,
Knowing that there's so much of you,
That I would more than love to know?

You have goals with an awesome ambition,
That will take you anywhere in life,
And you have a faith that is strong and steady,
With a spirit that's willing to fight.

You have a life that is undeserving,
Of anything less than the best,
And because you're worth more than a precious gem,
To know you – I have been blessed.

Bitter Biddies
(For Male-Challenged Females)

Belittled and befuddled, not at all bedazzled,
mad and mean, bent on beating up on male babes,
brooding, bubbling inside
trying to hide that real brazen attitude
being the brain of that operation called a relationship,
a brawl at breakfast, *cause they think they brilliant*,
backstabbing, big mouth, bad, bad Belinda Brown,
lip-dragging, throat tickling, know-it-all because
she's a ball-busting barracuda, biding time
while waiting to bounce on blinded victims.

Summer's Last Soiree

At summer's end the heat is hiked up
her last fete
trying to burn up everything in eyeshot
before she flits on.
Her heat was so disarming
You could see Satan himself fanning.
The party's over.
Picnic days are gone.
She's played out,
and it's time for her to quit.
Summer started out so gracious—
thought maybe she'd be understanding;
that wasn't happening.
Everyone and everything
was weakened by her biting temper.
She did not respect
the beauty of the day
flaunting before her.
By the afternoon,
she had made her entrance again.
Being indignant
was her way of having an advantage.
But now, she must move on
and let autumn check in.

A Season Of ...

Hot and cold beads of sweat
pissed off one minute, crying the next.
At night she's wrapped up in her sheets
like a mummy until the heat wave hits;
she unravels and relaxes.
Sleep creeps down after a refreshing breeze
of night air as piercing cold
slices through her causing
her to wrap back into
the warm womb of sheets
for her own private summers and winters.

Pillar of Strength

I've been the pillar of strength
but I never wanted to be.
The pillar of strength dams the
flood of emotion in order to help
those around him.
I've been the pillar of strength
For teammates – depressed on the field
Providing them leadership.
I've done it in the classroom
Offering advice and knowledge
to worried and nervous classmates – friends.
Worst of all – most painful, difficult
I've been the pillar when my brother
soaked my shirt sleeve with tears as he
cried on my shoulder
when Wade died.
The pillar of strength has nothing to lean on.
If the pillar fails – all will fail and fall.
Being the keystone that gives others strength
fills me with their spirit – they give me the strength
I need to carry on.
I've never wanted to be the pillar of strength
the one column
that holds up all around it.
But I will again when I am
needed to be.
Just like I know my brother and family will be the pillar
when the time comes
that my strength fails me.

Girl

They say, "Girl, you're too strong."

"Be a lady,"

"Wear pink."

"Don't ever drink,"

"and definitely don't think."

"Girl, what the hell are you doing, get behind that sink!"

Thunderstorm

The breeze is his smile
and the clouds are in his eyes,
the grass sways to the tickle of the touch of his eyelashes on your skin.
You can smell the rain and feel the great sensation
lightning crashes with that first great kiss
the sky in your eyes rolls back
and the thunder of love comes rolling in
touch by tender touch,
his rain quenches your skin.
Passion is the thunderstorm going on within.

Three Broken Hearted Fools

Three broken-hearted fools
That were left behind
Find peace within one another,
They talk a lot, but don't say a thing.
Hurts too bad, but they need a friend.
They all cry alone, but come together again.
Fools of a feather flock together,
The blind leading the blind
In hopes of happier times.
We are three broken-hearted fools
Left behind.

The Hive

The power of the individual
Superceded by the few,
The ones who make the rules,
The ones who tell us what to do.

We are the workers,
The peasants, the drones,
Destined to walk side by side,
But always be alone.

Scared to death to trust or love,
Scared to death to fly,
Fearing every chance we take,
Could be our time to die.

Marching toward the common goal,
We each wear different masks,
We lead out lives as we are told,
We do as we are asked.

We are of the hive mind,
There is no self within,
We cannot think outside the box,
It is too great a sin.

We are the prisoners,
Of someone else's fate,
Dreaming of the day,
That we can finally escape.

Stoned

Remember that child; she's in your soul.
She's down right now, down in a hole.
The people around her are hurting her bad.
Rocks and stones, with words they have.
With each stone that hits, she bruises.
She calls for you, these people are cruel.
Desperately trying to climb out of this hole,
gets hit with a rock, in the head, someone bowled.
She falls to the bottom with a thump
and crack. She's dripping with blood, all down her back.
Grab that rope and throw it down.
Hold on tight and pull her above ground.
Take that cloak and wrap her good.
Tend to her wounds, it's best you should.
Give her water, nourishment of life.
Battles will come, just help her fight.

Instrumental Orgasm

It's ok to touch my keys,
the sharps and flats of my baby grand.

I'll play yours back
even blow your horn
if you'll pluck my harp in four plays.

Pierce the high notes on my magical flute
and I'll beat your drum in rhythm.

Slide your throbbing trombone
into my vibrating organ
until we climax like tambourines.

Mom's Shopping List

milk

bread

time to myself

eggs

hotdogs

a maid every Friday

flour

Cheerios

privacy in the bathroom

sugar

kool-aid

fewer piles of laundry

apples

bananas

a vacation from my life

The Empty Face

The man has no trace
I wouldn't recognize his face
He is thought of by many
But how can he be

The people who knew him believe
They could find some relief
In the sight of this man
I wish I can
The sight of him never comes
Am I just being dumb?

To think of the day
He would see me now
He didn't care before
Does he even know how?

What happened and why?
Where have you gone?
Why did you go?
How far and how long?

I don't understand
Was it really that bad?
For you just to stay
Just to be my dad

Why don't I know more?
When will you be coming home?
Not given the chance

To adore my father
The only choice was with my mother

I wanted to be daddy's little girl
You could've opened my heart
With your special key
Fulfill my dreams
I would pay any fee

To be filled with the excitement
To know this man is all I ask
No more, hide and go seek
From behind your mask

Staring into the mirror
I must face the facts
The image of my father
Will never be back.

So You Want to be a Teacher?

Why do you want to teach?
To make a difference in the
World.

You don't get paid much.
Money is not why I want
To teach.

Those kids can be awful.
Probably because no one
Showed they cared.

But you're too smart to teach.
With your attitude, no wonder
We are surrounded by ignorance.

So you want to be a teacher?
Maybe my students will turn out
Better than you because I care.

The Death of a Child

The death of a child, a 5-month-old infant
The mother goes wild, life lost in an instant.
The father is bare; the siblings just stare
The doctor is present; no one knows why he's there.
To blame is insane; to ask questions is useless
Something must be done; the killer was ruthless.
It crept in the house unseen or detected
It had the strength of the wind; no harm was predicted.
It completed its task in the still of the night
It had no remorse or concern for what's right.
It came with one mission in mind to fulfill
One sweet young innocent soul it must kill.
In a house full of children, plenty of kids
It took the youngest, for its name was SIDS.

Missing You

Every night I lay down my head,
Wondering where you are, and missing you.
Once you were here with us,
But now you have gone on to bigger and better places.
You would help me when I needed help.
You would laugh with me when I needed someone to laugh with.
A shoulder to cry on you gave me.
And a friend to call is what you were.
Every night I ask the Lord why?
Was it because your work here was done,
Or because your work there had just begun.
I will always remember you as long as I live,
And I pray every night that one day we will meet again.

Erika

The name means forever queen
But yours means so much more.

You are a queen – yes
But also a lion,
The most courageous 12-year-old
This world has ever seen.
Needles, IV's, liquid diets,
You still won the battle.

It can also mean Titan,
Strong and unbreakable
The rock of this family.
Blocked intestines, pancreatitis,
Maybe a tumor, possibly cancer
I looked into your eyes
They said, "Bring it on."

For me, your name means hero
Having the will to succeed
In the face of despair.
No candy, no home,
No friends to play with outside.
Through all of this,
You gave me a smile.



The Reason

"Mmmmmm...doesn't this choooocolate candy look sooooo good?"

Zel ever-so-delicately unwrapped the candy bar as he stood by the fence, taunting my drunken, starving next-door neighbor Chuck. Zel's beady eyes were watery with suppressed laughter. He paused to break off a piece with his jointy fingers. His pubescent, elf-like voice rose again.

"Betcha want some, don'tcha, Chuuuck? Mmmmmm...oh, man!"

Zel made a point of checking, savoring every morsel. Chuck's bloodshot eyes concentrated on the space directly before him, occasionally darting in Zel's direction. He remained silent. I sat on the steps of my back porch, smirking and shaking my head in shame of my comical friend.

Chuck was seated on his own porch, the typical drunk with his gray stubble, worn felt hat and old, raggedy suit, leftovers from the 1940s or something. The odor of urine floated from his front door and would sometimes tag our nostrils. That guy was so old. His eyes were some expired shade of gray. Those red-rimmed things revealed his longing for some of the chocolate Zel was waving around. Chuck's bony, black fingers brought a cigarette to his mouth. I had to stop Zel's silly jeering.

"Man, let's go. My mom's waiting."

I felt in my pocket for the food stamps she gave me, ready to head to the convenience store. Zel's pointy ears hadn't received my summons, so I repeated myself.

"Zel, let's—"

"Hey, Ninoooo!"

Chuck had suddenly yelled to my mom, who had stepped outside to make sure Zel and I were leaving. I swear, that was the only thing I ever heard that man so vibrantly say. I mean, I would see him mumbling around with the other bums, but, "Heeeey, Ninoooo!" always caught me by surprise. My mother's name is Nina, but somehow Chuck made her name sound real drunk too.

"Hello, Chuck!" she chirped sweetly.

"We're leaving, mom," I informed.

Zel and I walked down Freeman Street toward our destination. Man, Kansas City, Kansas was just as dead as Chuck's eyes. Every day I passed through these neighborhoods, one more house would be boarded up, one more barbershop shut down. The colors of this place were deprived of any life. It was so drained that it just exuded some kind of sadness. Kansas City, Kansas could burn down tomorrow, and it seems nobody would care. No one cares about stray cats and stray people like Chuck. All Chuck ever did was get up in the morning and go to the liquor store. He was an able man, but every time I saw him, he would be wandering around or sitting on his porch. What did drunks like Chuck have to live for?

Zel and I decided to buy an unnecessary amount of Snickers, Now and Laters, peanut butter cups, beef jerky, and Pepsi. We did this every once in a while and called it our "feast." I always made sure that Zel wasn't looking when I paid for the goods, but this time, he saw. I guess my shame was too obvious because Zel reassured me, "Don't worry man. My mom uses them too."

Though the moment was still a little awkward, I handed the food stamps to the cashier with more confidence.

Soon we were sitting on my back porch again, enjoying the feast. Chuck was in the same place. I decided to start the torment this time. I strutted to the fence, took a hearty bite of my beef jerky and breathed, "This is delicious. So spicy!"

Zel chimed in, "And this Pepsi is so refreshing!"

"Don't worry. The man is not in need of any beverages," I remarked.

Chuck stood up and went inside. I chuckled at Zel, who had an odd look on his face.

"What's up, Zel?" I inquired.

"I was just thinking...have you ever been in Chuck's house?"

"I don't know if I would want to!"

"But haven't you wondered what it looks like and stuff?"

"I know what it smells like."

"For real man. We should sneak in there. He won't know. Maybe we can scare him or something, get a laugh from the look on his drunken face."

I thought about it. Entering Chuck's house didn't seem like an adventure, but I had nothing better to do. Besides, it was just old Chuck. He needed some excitement.

"All right, man."

We found the perfect time about ten minutes later when Chuck meandered down the street.

"Let's go!"

Chuck's door was always open. We let the urine penetrate our noses and stepped inside. Our eyes had to adjust to the room because it was quite dark. I guess this was the living room. There was nothing in it, just a small, creaky room with chipped white paint and a coat closet. Newspaper and Old Kentucky Tavern bottles were scattered around in places. This was pointless, just what I thought an old bum's house would look like. It may as well have been made of cardboard.

"Zel, this is stupid. C'mon, let's--"

"Chuck? Is that you?"

Though the voice was small and fragile, we jumped. When we heard it coming closer, from what I gathered was the kitchen, Zel and I scurried to a closet. We shrank against the wall as the voice called. Curiosity got the best of Zel and he focused his eyes on the sliver of light coming from the crack in the door.

"Who's that?" he asked.

I wanted to know. "Move, man!"

I pushed Zel aside and strained to see. Then she came into view, emerging from the shadows. It was a delicate, small woman in a wheelchair. Her soft, white hair was in a single braid down her back. She was buried under numerous quilts and blankets. Her skin had a reddish tone to it, and the crevices in her face were pleasantly defined in the light of the front door. It seemed as if the woman had sat in that wheelchair with those clothes for ages.

"Chuck? Who's there?"

"Yeah, who is that?" I whispered.

"Mary, get back inside. It's cold out," Chuck pleaded as he stepped into the house. "Look, now Mrs. Arnold fixed you a plate for dinner."

Chuck placed the foil-covered plate into Mary's hands and left the room. A few seconds later, he dragged a rusty chair beside her wheelchair. Gently, he scooped up some greens and lifted them to Mary's mouth. She felt for his hand, and it was then that I realized she was blind.

Chuck finished feeding her, ate the scraps that were left, and headed to the outside world again. Who was Mary? Was she his wife? His sister? Was she the reason he wandered around? How did he keep her taken care of? I saved the questions in my mind until I found a chance to safely sneak out.

Zel and I unintentionally emulated Chuck as we sat on my porch again, silently staring forward. I thought that Chuck was always alone, wallowing in his own stupor.

"Who was that crazy lady? She was scary," Zel declared.

"Yeah I know. That must be Chuck's woman. I guess she is crazy," I joked. The subject changed.

When Zel and I were through talking about Spiderman or whatever, Zel went home.

Without a word, I marched to the kitchen. Carefully, I put together two peanut butter sandwiches (I was no gourmet cook), and proceeded to Chuck's. I wasn't going to taunt with them.

The First Dance

After a long journey of restlessness, I finally see you face-to-face. I look at you with complete "awe." I feel my heart pumping so hard in my chest; I have to catch my breath. You walk over to me. You don't say hi, but you immediately take me into your strong arms. I smell the scent of your cologne as I lay my face on your chest. I feel like everything in the world stops at that moment but us. I feel as if we are dancing to a soft, slow jam that only we can hear. I feel my body tremble as your masculine hands caress me up and down my back, and a faint brush, but yet unmistakable, love-filled kiss from you is placed on my forehead.

Still dancing in your arms with no words being exchanged, I feel your hands in my hair. Tilting my head at an upward angle, our eyes meet, and we momentarily gaze into each other's eyes. My heart skips another beat, knowing what is next to come. I close my eyes only briefly. You kiss me with such passionate, soft, wet lips, the sound of complete ecstasy escapes me from deep within. Unable to contain yourself any longer, you kiss down my chin and slowly kiss your way around to the sensitive spots on my neck. Feeling my body quiver with undying pleasure...you continue. You kiss the other side of my neck, the inside, while my breathing becomes heavier and heavier.

At the realization that we are still standing in a room full of traveling people, I open my eyes. I look up at you smiling at me. Then you whisper in my ear, "Te quiero." With your right arm around me, your left hand caresses the sensual curves of my waist. You move your left hand up to my shoulder, bringing me closer still. Again you whisper in my ear with a passionate, love-filled voice, "You are what love is, and you are what beauty is supposed to be. You are my heart and you are in my heart, mami." I feel the hot stream of tears as happiness and joy overwhelms my body, heart, mind, and soul. Wiping my tears away, you drink an eternal kiss from my lips.

Grandpa's Damsel

The first time I saw her, she sat unmoving, glued to the ground. I was thirteen, and she was beautiful. Even covered in dirt and crawling with insects, her grace and elegance shone through the grime. Her name was "Grandpa's Damsel," and she was my first (and only) boat.

The summer of 1989 began for me as it would for any other kid; long, hot days were spent mostly in front of the air conditioner, soaps running endlessly on television. But I was different than the other kids in the neighborhood that year; I had an opportunity. I was getting out. In just a few short days I would be arriving in nice, cool Northern Michigan, right on the lake. My best friend, Rachel, had a grandma that lived up there, and she invited us to come. Of course, I accepted; I wasn't stupid. New faces, no parents, in a word, freedom, for two whole weeks. I felt as if I were embarking on a journey to paradise.

Northport, Michigan was one of those picturesque, waterside havens attracting tourists like seventh grade boys to a bikini poster. Visitors and locals crowded onto the three main streets in town, enjoying the feeling of hot pavement on their bare feet. Seagulls cried overhead and swooped down, hoping to get a taste of human life. People dressed in swimsuits, shorts, and tank tops swarmed the old-fashioned ice cream parlor wanting to spend, spend, spend. Money flashed, skin burned, and I was a part of it all. We drove slowly through the town, taking it all in, The Police blasting from the tape deck, the summer breeze blowing our long hair through the windows. Rocks popped under the tires as we turned onto the wooded, gravel road where grandma's house was. I was bursting with excitement, anxious to meet this wonderful old lady who was opening up her home to me. Boy, was I in for a surprise.

As we turned into the drive, we were greeted with the icy glare of grandma's hard blue eyes, and my wide smile slowly faded. As she stood by the garage, I felt like she was biding her time, waiting to pounce. I got out slowly, knowing those glassy eyes never stopped glaring at me. I contemplated my shoes while she sized me up, and it occurred to me that even though she had told Rachel to bring a friend this year, she was

already jealous of me for stealing her time with her granddaughter. She knew 13-year-olds didn't want to be around grownups when they didn't have to, especially old ones.

I finally had the courage to look up, and I decided it was my turn to check her out. She wore all white, ironically, and apart from her thin silver hair and venomous blue eyes, everything else was orange. It was like a fake tanning cream disaster. I mean, she was orange! Her legs reminded me of the two sticks that hold up those double Popsicles, and from this, the name "Bird Woman" was born.

I was almost immediately dubbed "the bad influence." It didn't matter what happened, I got the blame. She could've sat on the porch and watched Rachel bust her windows with a baseball bat, and I still would have been held responsible. Rachel's mom told me not to worry about it, but she wasn't the one who was feeling the old bat's heat. And she was only there to drop us off; she was leaving in a couple of days, and then I knew I would really feel Bird Woman's wrath.

After her mom left, Rachel and I spent our days swimming in the icy lake until our lips turned blue or exploring uncharted territory on our borrowed ten-speeds. Once out of grandma's sight, I was free. We trekked through every orchard, forest, and field we could find, and it was on one of those expeditions that we discovered a small lake hidden in the woods. We returned to this hideaway often, and it was on a perfectly cloudless day that we discovered her. She was partially hidden in knee-length weeds, and a glance in that direction had brought my attention to the wooden hull peeking out between the blades of grass. I let out a yell and went leaping to her, with Rachel close behind. We pulled her up and took a good look. Faded letters that had been painted on years ago spelled out her name, "Grandpa's Damsel," which we thought had a beautiful ring to it. It just seemed to fit. A strange feeling soon washed over us. Maybe it was a sense of freedom, or maybe it was a feeling of excitement, but either way, we just felt so alive. Nobody knew of this obviously abandoned boat, and even though we knew I would be busted if Bird Woman caught us, we immediately laid claim on the Damsel.

The next morning, Rachel and I did the unthinkable and set the alarm for about seven. We saw the sunrise, dewdrops on the grass, and robins hunting for breakfast. Grandma was still asleep as we scrambled out of bed and threw sandwiches and pop into my backpack. We loaded Rachel's backpack with rags and cleaning solutions; the Damsel was getting a facelift that day.

She was sitting there as we knew she would be; she was like an old friend waiting for us. We immediately got back to work, dumping out the bugs and grass that had taken over her and scrubbing furiously at the caked-on dirt. Finally, she was clean and we stepped back to admire our work. If I squinted my eyes, I couldn't really see the peeling paint or the scratches her previous owner had inflicted upon her. Minutes passed while we enjoyed the sense of accomplishment we felt before we decided to shove off the muddy bank. We settled in, a bit gingerly at first, but soon our only oar was cutting through the water with strong strokes. The whole day was spent paddling around, eating soggy sandwiches, drinking warm pop, and basking in the hot sunlight. We felt so wonderfully free and full of life; it was as if we were on our own private lake, completely undisturbed. Even grandma couldn't reach me here. I was invincible.

It wasn't long before the afternoon was fading and we realized we needed to get home now. Bird Woman would be really ticked if we were late for dinner, and after the day I'd just had, I really wasn't in the mood for an ass chewing. Somehow, in our rush to make it to shore, the oar broke and sank to the bottom of the lake. We stared in stunned silence as dread filled us both. We were paddleless in the middle of a lake, the sun sinking fast, and I just knew the old bat was counting the minutes. With the same thought in mind, we both dove over the side of the boat and began swimming the distance to shore, pushing The Damsel in front of us. It wasn't too long before we felt the thick, squishy mud oozing between our toes. We pushed and pulled and finally got the old boat safely onto dry land. With barely a look back, we grabbed our packs, hopped on the bikes, buzzed past the cherry orchards and dense forests, and onto the familiar

gravel road. Somehow, we made it to the house in record time, but I was still reluctant to go inside. The streetlight outside was already on, which meant we were late. Of course, grandma reminded us of this at least twenty times while we were eating, but tonight was different. I didn't even hear her. It had just occurred to me that our first time on our boat would also be our last.

Our vacation ended just a couple of days after discovering "Grandpa's Damsel." We went back to the lake once after our adventure, but only to say goodbye. We approached her slowly, knowing she would never go on the water again, at least not with us. When I sat on one of her hard, wooden seats, it wasn't the same; the magic was gone. We left sadly, but also with the memory of the most perfect afternoon a thirteen-year-old could have.

The Spray

"The road to Hell is paved with good intentions."

As Braxis rode silently in the back of the automated taxicab, this was the only idea that kept running through his mind. He could not remember the person who first said it, but that was a minor annoyance that did not really trouble him, as it usually would have. There was a time when he was younger and more naïve when he would look at a question like this and ponder and analyze it for hours at a time until he remembered the person who said it; he loved to challenge his mind in such ways and solve riddles. It was this interest that first got him interested in science. Now though, that seemed so long ago and distant. He began to realize that the idea was more than just some famous quote; it was bound to be his fate.

All that Braxis had wanted to do after becoming a scientist and inventor was help people. He had no idea that by fighting so hard to help so many people, he would become a wanted man. A man who is hardly more than a common criminal, hunted and pursued everywhere he went. He would have been able to continue to live his normal, boring life if he had never invented the Spray. He could have married his girlfriend and lived happily ever after.

"Go faster taxi, I want to get there as soon as possible." He said to the driverless car that was taking him to the nearest amusement park; the vehicle beeped at him in response like R2-D2 from Star Wars. Braxis looked out over the highway and saw the two-hundred foot roller coaster off in the distance and then looked out the back window of the cab. He was sure that the corporate agents who wanted his Spray were not far behind. He could not see them, but he knew that they were close; they were always close. Afterward, he took the small hand-held spray bottle out of his inner coat pocket.

"Don't lose him. That Spray is too important to the company. We have strict orders to take him in alive if he doesn't give up the formula. Move closer to him, but not so close that he notices you," Agent JakZur said to the young officer driving his car. JakZur had a knack for intimidating anybody he was in the presence of. He had the look and the scars of a

grizzled old soldier who has definitely been in his share of battles. With his gray hair cropped into a neat crew cut, his broad shoulders, and the huge four pointed scar under the black eye patch on his right eye, the young agent knew that the man sitting next to him was not somebody to argue with or question. As the car sped up, JakZur turned back to face the road ahead of them with a smile on his face, the red beam shooting forth from the eye patch seemed to glow with greater intensity. He quickly pulled out his gun, an old semi-automatic from the twentieth century and popped the clip to check how many bullets he had left in the magazine. He loved that gun, and he knew that he may very possibly have to use it and he smiled again to himself.

"Shit, I should have known this kind of thing would happen. How could I have been so stupid?" Braxis asked himself, the taxi just beeped again in a way similar to how a therapist says "hmm." He began to question why he even began to create the Spray. He remembered wanting to do something noble and miraculous with his vast knowledge of science. As he always had, he immediately set the highest goals for himself and would not stop until he had accomplished them. He set out to do the noblest thing he could think of. He wanted to create a cure for cancer. Braxis remembered toiling for countless hours in the library and the laboratory, sacrificing time with Lita, letting life pass him by, always pushing and striving to do what nobody had previously been able to do. He was even more certain now that that was what made a normal life with the woman he loved impossible.

Finally, after seven long years, he did it. He had invented something that would not only serve as a cure for cancer, but also for all diseases, even the AIDS virus. After extensive testing, he was sure that the Spray would ease suffering for billions of people all over the world. He was also certain beyond any shadow of a doubt, that he would win the Nobel Piece Prize for the year 3024. All he had to do was to publish his findings and show people that it actually worked. The concept ended up being answered by a very simple chemical reaction. Braxis had created a formula that could literally dissolve any matter into nothing more than air, a sort of vaporization fluid. He even perfected the formula in a way that would allow it to be

controlled and contained. By using only the most miniscule amount of liquid uranium, Braxis made the formula so it would only perform the act of vaporizing matter if it were dispersed as a mist, in other words, if it were sprayed onto the matter it would be dissolving. And so, the Spray was developed.

As Braxis looked at the last spray vile in his hand, the taxi pulled up to the entrance of the amusement park and stopped. Braxis was in a sort of trance state in which the only things he was conscious of were his own thoughts. It wasn't until the taxi's incessant beeping grew louder and more obnoxious like an alarm clock that he realized where he was and that he would have to get moving again. He pressed his thumb into the jelly like notch in the seat to pay his fare and got out of the taxi. He immediately moved into the park, constantly looking over his shoulder for the jet black Lincolns that the corporate agents always drove. He looked farther up the highway and to his horror, he saw one of the black cars with a low purple light emanating from the bottom like some sort of pulsating shadow. He only hoped that he would be able to hide out in the crowds of the park. He knew that he couldn't hide forever though; Agent JakZur was far to good at what he did for that. Braxis was certain it was that agent who was the one after him. Braxis knew the first time he had ever met him that this guy was the best at what he did and would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. It was JakZur who started Braxis' pursuit, and it was JakZur who was going to finish it.

Braxis knew that something had to be done. He had to make sure that the Spray did not get into the hands of the man with the four-pointed scar over his right eye or into the hands of the greedy corporate bastards he worked for. It was JakZur that got Braxis to think about the horrible applications the Spray could be put toward. As Braxis walked through the park toward the roller coaster, he remembered his first meeting with the agent. It seemed like eons ago that the brash, grizzly warrior appeared on his doorstep. It was shortly after Braxis had published his findings and his discovery of the Spray and Braxis could still remember it as if it had just happened.

Braxis was working tirelessly at his computer, preparing for the

presentation of the Spray to the scientific community at the ball they were holding in his honor. He knew that now that his research was complete, he would be able to finally make a life with Lita. Braxis knew that soon the Spray would lead to money and fame beyond his and Lita's wildest dreams, as well as ending the suffering of billions all over the globe. He was awakened from a dreamless sleeplike trance by a knock on the door.

"Come on in Lita, the door is open." He called thinking that the knock came from his beloved girl friend. He quickly closed out all of the programs he was running on his computer and shut down all of his files. The knocker entered the small apartment and Braxis was surprised to turn to look into the eyes of a tall brusque looking man with two days worth of beard stubble and a menacing black eye patch over his right eye that looked like it had a laser sight shooting out of it.

"Who the hell..." Braxis began to ask.

"Don't be alarmed Braxis, I'm not going to hurt you. My name is Agent JakZur, and I just want to talk to you about your Spray. The Unitech Corporation, whom I represent, would like to ask about your plans and would like to make an offer to purchase your formula in order to get it to the market as quickly as possible. The people of Unitech realize that the potential for your spray is boundless, particularly in military applications." He stated calmly in a voice that sounded like pieces of coarse sand paper being rubbed together.

Braxis remembered that fearsome gritty voice and still got goose bumps and chills all over his body. He remembered being utterly shocked and appalled when JakZur started to talk to him about the possible military uses of the Spray. Braxis did not want his creation to be responsible for the deaths of innumerable people everywhere so that this Unitech Corporation could only make its own pockets deeper. He quietly explained to JakZur that the Spray was intended to be a cure for suffering, not a weapon to cause more suffering, and as such, that the Spray was not for sale. He showed JakZur the door. As Braxis remembered this, JakZur's final chilling words rang in his head like dozens of church bells. He would never forget those particular words from that gritty stone voice.

"Braxis, one way or another, Unitech will have your Spray. I never lose."

After he grinded out these words, JakZur left Braxis' apartment.

It was those words that got Braxis to act. He could just tell by the way he had said them that JakZur was going to come after him. Almost immediately after the menacing agent had left, Braxis took a small portion of the Spray and put it into a pocket spray bottle that could hold five sprays worth as a precautionary tactic. He was fortunate that he had done so because a few days after their initial meeting, JakZur and his squad of corporate agents smashed a jet black Lincoln with a purple light out the bottom into the ground floor of Braxis' apartment building. He watched them do this from behind the blinds in his window. After they crashed into the building, Braxis heard them running up the stairs and JakZur screaming that their target was the computer in the apartment that contained the files about how to develop the Spray.

Braxis quickly did the only thing he could think of to prevent the formula from falling into the hands of the agents. He snatched the pocket spray bottle from his table and quickly sprayed his entire computer with two sprays. As he watched, the computer seemed to sizzle for a moment, and then in a cloud of steam, it evaporated into the air. Braxis then hurriedly popped open the window and exited down the fire escape just as the agents burst into the apartment. He started running and he knew that they would follow him soon. They did follow as quickly as they could and have been chasing him ever since. He knew that he had to run. But he had nowhere to go; he absolutely did not dare to contact Lita. He knew that she would be put in danger if he got anywhere near her now and he cared too much for her to risk her getting hurt or killed. He had to resign himself to the fact that he could never see her again, at least until this whole situation had come to an end.

As Braxis was making his way through the crowded amusement park, hoping he was thoroughly camouflaged, he remembered everything about that day. It was hard for him to look back at that time and believe that it was only a little over a year ago; it seemed like it was a lifetime. Suddenly, a small burst of yellow light whizzed and crackled past his head and made a nearby game booth explode. Braxis' mind was no longer lingering on the past as he quickly realized that the agents had found him. Without so much

as a sideways glance, Braxis began to sprint toward the towering two hundred foot roller coaster. When he covered the distance he headed to the highest peak of the roller coaster, and before he had time to think about it, he began to climb the scaffold like frame of the roller coaster, the pocket spray bottle still in his hand. As he climbed, he realized that none of the cars were running and he realized the roller coaster must be out of service.

"No you fool, don't use the static pulsar, I want him alive you idiot!" JakZur shouted at the agent who had fired the yellow ball of energy at Braxis. JakZur immediately followed up his comment with a single punch to the man's jaw. Unconscious, the man fell in a heap into the one-eyed agent's arms. He let go and more threw the man onto the ground than let him fall.

"Gentlemen, I want him alive. His mind is now the only key to being able to create that Spray. Do not use lethal force unless we have a sample of the Spray in our possession. Unless we get a sample, use only the stun rubber. Understood?" as JakZur gave this direct order to all of his men, they all made their way quickly through the now mostly empty stretch of amusement park toward the roller coaster that they could see Braxis climbing. When they were in range, JakZur ordered one of his men to fire a stun rubber round up at Braxis as JakZur started to climb up after him.

Braxis looked over his shoulder and hung by one hand for a moment as he watched the agent take aim with what looked like a bazooka. The agent looked at him through his sight and pulled the trigger. The gun recoiled and the thing that came out looked like a gelatinous bubble of air. As it gained speed toward its target, it began to move and condense its molecules until the stun rubber projectile was formed. Braxis knew that the projectile carried with it a small electrical charge that would shock him into unconsciousness upon the instant of impact. Just as the agent fired the weapon, Braxis pulled out his Spray and sprayed a small cloud in front of him. He watched the strange rubber cartridge enter the cloud, and by the time the shot moved through the cloud, it had evaporated into nothingness. Braxis quickly turned and with JakZur hot on his heels, climbed to the top of the rickety old coaster. When he reached the top, he turned to run

toward the maintenance walkway just as the machine like agent reached the top.

"Hold it Braxis," JakZur yelled. "Turn around with your hands up and come with me quietly. It's over. I don't want to shoot you, but I will if I have to." Braxis slowly turned and raised his hands. For some reason, he was not surprised to see that JakZur was ordering him around not with a modern pulse weapon, but an old twentieth century fashion, forty-five millimeter bullet firing pistol. He gave a little chuckle because JakZur seemed like the kind of person who would use that kind of thing; it must have been some kind of sentimental thing for this old combatant. Braxis began to slowly lower his hands.

"Listen, JakZur, you can't kill me. I am the only person who knows the formula for synthesizing the Spray. All my other back up files have been destroyed and this little bottle is the only remaining sample. I have enough in here for two more sprays. If I use this, you need me alive. My head is the only place where the Spray will exist. You know it and I know it." As Braxis finished speaking, he paused for a moment to let his words sink in then, before JakZur could react, Braxis pointed his spray bottle and sprayed the pistol in the agent's hand. Before JakZur knew what was happening and he could get a shot off, he found himself pulling the trigger of nothing but an imaginary pistol. He gave a small laugh and looked at Braxis with his one eye and his piercing, laser sight eye patch.

"Let's end this son. I'm tired of chasing you, I'm sure you're tired of running. Look down at my car and see for yourself why this is going to end tonight," JakZur said with a crack of a cocky smile turning up on one side of his face. Braxis slowly turned his head to look where he was pointing. To his horror, the rear door of the car was opened and he saw the light catch the fiery red hair and the blue leather jacket that he knew so well and he realized instantly that JakZur and his men had brought Lita to the amusement park.

"You, you bastard." Braxis spoke quietly to Agent JakZur.

"You give me the bottle with the last of the Spray, and I promise that my men will stand down, and you can return to your normal life. What do you say? This has to end." The old man in the black suit said with a breathless

grin, his eye patch glowing with the light of a bulb that is about to burn out. Braxis looked down at Lita and back up at JakZur with his eyes filling with tears about to erupt like a geyser.

"JakZur, I won't let my Spray be used as a weapon of death," He choked out the words while trying to fight the tears. "I developed the Spray with the plan to benefit mankind, the best of intentions. I know that the road to Hell is paved with the best intentions. I know that if this last Spray is used, you need me alive and you won't stop hunting me until you track me down and force me to recreate the formula. So I have made a decision." The tears began to bleed from his eyes now as he spoke.

"This decision is the solution to the entire problem and it ensures that this cursed Spray will never be used by the wrong kind of people for the wrong kind of reasons. Damn you JakZur, damn you straight to Hell for forcing me to make this decision. Goodbye JakZur. You truly are a credit to your profession." As Braxis finished these final words, he looked down again at Lita and with his eyes leaking and burning painfully he watched as she began to sob and blew him a small kiss toward him. When she blew him that kiss, his heart cried out in anguish and he did not want to go through with his decision. Braxis then forced himself to dam the flooding of his eyes, stood up straight, gave JakZur a small bow and shook his hand. The agent grasped his hand and gave Braxis a small smile. Braxis then watched JakZur's smile instantly fade when he raised his left hand and pointed the spray bottle directly at his own head. Before JakZur could move to stop him, Braxis fired the Spray. After a moment, Braxis' headless body collapsed on to the track of the roller coaster. It was still gripping JakZur's hand in a handshake.

She's Gone

When I was delivered to the poison my skin was on fire. It burned every thread of my nerves into demon thoughts. I was strung up; an electric wire. My sorrow encompassed me and the lightning left my throat raw.

March came slowly this year. I stayed off the poison for a few months. It seemed ghosts desired to be my lover, speaking in voodoo heart beats, zombie headhunter treats on every point of my wife's favorite white picket fence; foggy hallucinations.

Musings are those disenchanting dark stars. They call to me. They outline my wife. She's been dead for three years yet still a disembodied traveler. Sometimes ecstasy raises me a foot off my bed and I glow. I really glow. I haven't told anybody this, but I hear her whispering.

The whispering became a loud buzzing which I eventually thought was old age. And several times I've chased a blood orange glow. It hovers over my head. It's her. The glow is my wife. She chases me sometimes and sometimes I chase her.

I tell her, "Time has uniquely weathered you darling. It's just you are so damned transparent." Then I talk to myself. "Haven't you noticed Bob? She doesn't answer back. The noise you hear isn't her. Your wife can't hear you."

Old and brittle, I rest on the couch and I remember her smile. Night after night; I think of our conversations. Only recently I feel they are only inaudible memories transformed into wind scraping the pane.

She's gone now. I guess I couldn't let go. "Good-bye Betty. Good-bye my love." A heavenly glow rose one cool evening. Into the heaven's white abyss without me it rose. Far from any earthly pain she's gone.

Tangled and ordinary I sleep firmly fixed and limited these nights. The poison left me for good although I quiescently search the sunsets for death. I miss Betty. Tuesdays and Thursdays I eat muffins and drink gallons of coffee and I deal with the remaining issues of life; chess with Tom and Hank, and Wednesday at Gilda's Smorgasbord.

Entwined In a Lack of Kindling

Brent was five years old, Anna eleven months, sitting smudge-faced with green beans and squash, an orange clump dangling from her earlobe. All over her white cotton Baby Step bib covering the invisible little red apple designs was a deluge of green and orange pop art.

Their mother absolutely loathed her horrid husband coming home from work. And he abhorred his construction career. Her husband was mangled; verbally manhandled by his foreman. His irate temperament attacked her before he even stormed through the door.

"I commuted just for you!" He'd yell at her as she served him a man size portion of steak and salsa. It was like swallowing fresh-squeezed lemon juice after chopping onions, little droplets of sour burning fury down her throat, in her eyes. She was the suspect to his anger. She was on trial.

She deliberately gulped down two beers beforehand just to get through dinner, then clean up afterwards, wash the kids, read them stories and make sure she serviced her husband.

The night he backhanded her across the jaw, her head paralyzed against the coffee table, a slit above her right eyebrow streamed a small river of blood. The black and blue lump on her temple was hidden behind a messy curl of hair.

She faltered to awaken. The hanging light over a round fog sparkled off the glass kitchen table. She could see a flash of fright in her small children's eyes. Her husband said, "See kids, that's what happens when Daddy works all day and comes home to drunk Mommy."

It took a decade and a half searching for that intangible light and resurrection. Entwined in a lack of kindling, she's still lost.

A high-contrast, black and white photograph. In the foreground, a hand is holding a pen, with the pen tip pointing towards the bottom right. The background is dark and out of focus, showing vertical light streaks. In the bottom right corner, the word "Trama" is written in a cursive script.

Trama

GREENTHUMB

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Vera Iderson, 59, housewife, married to Norman Iderson for 39 years. Vera is the mother of one child, her son Mark Iderson.

Norman Iderson, 65, security guard at Independence National Bank for the last 45 years. Norman is the father of Mark Iderson.

Mark Iderson, 37, son of Norman and Vera Iderson, single college professor at a university two hours away from his parents' home.

Lyndon Wilder, 62, Vera Iderson's older brother, married to Madeline Wilder, owner of a gas station.

Madeline Wilder, 60, housewife, married to Lyndon Wilder, sister-in-law to Vera Iderson.

Funeral Director, minor character

Two paramedics, minor characters

Dumpster, Norman's pet cat

Props, 1 large plant named Daphne and 5 smaller plants.

ACT ONE SCENE 1

(It is 7:30 on a Thursday evening in the living room of Norman and Vera Iderson in Independence, MO. Vera

is waiting for Norman to come home. He is two hours late. A cat is curled up on the couch.)

VERA

(She enters the stage from the kitchen entrance with a watering container and damp cloth. She is dressed in a housedress. She appears to have once been a pretty woman, but now looks worn out with a noticeable limp and crooked nose. She walks toward the plants on the other side of the stage and begins speaking to the plants as she waters them.)

You all were some thirsty babies today. You'd think I never gave you anything to drink the way you're sucking that water down. I'm going to miss you guys when I start my job on Monday, especially you, Daphne. (Vera talks to and pays particular attention to a plant she has named Daphne.) We've never been apart, have we? You always make sure of that. (Vera caresses Daphne and smiles. She then moves on and lovingly touches the leaves on each of the plants, talking to them like they were real people as she waters each one. The telephone rings. Vera limps to the end table to answer it.)

VERA

Hello? Hi Mark. It's so good to hear from you. How are you? (Pause while Vera listens to reply.) You got the professor job you wanted? (Pause) That's great. (Vera acts excited.) When do you start teaching the class? (Pause) I have good news too. I got a job at a plant store and

I start Monday. (Pause) Well, I got the job when I was going to the grocery store to get beer for your daddy. I saw the help wanted sign at the plant store next door. They needed someone who knew a lot about exotic plants, and I do. (Pause) Why would you say it might not be a good idea? (Pause) Now don't you worry about what your dad will say. I'll persuade him to let me work, one way or another. In fact, I think I hear him driving up. I better go. Love you Mark. Bye.

(Vera hangs up phone.)

(A car is heard pulling into the driveway. An engine is turned off and footsteps approach the front door. A commotion is heard outside as Norman falls down looking for his house key. Vera goes to the door and opens it. When she does, Dumpster, Norman's cat, runs out the front door. A drunk Norman angrily pulls himself up in the doorway, holding a beer can in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other hand.)

NORMAN

God dammit woman. (Norman hollers through slurred words.) Are you too stupid to figure out that if Dumpster is in the living room and you open the door, he's going to run out? If he doesn't come back within the next hour, your ass is going to be out there looking for him. (Norman stumbles through the door and onto the couch in the living room.) I didn't rescue him from the dumpster at the bank just so you could open the door and lose him. (Norman pauses for a moment.) Did you get Dumpster some fresh fish at the store like I told you to?

VERA

It's in the fridge. (Vera points apologetically towards the kitchen.) I've got your dinner still waiting for you in the fridge if you want it. (Vera walks over to the couch and sits by Norman.)

NORMAN

You didn't fix that meatloaf shit again, did you? You know that stuff gives me the runs. I'm not that hungry anyway. They had my retirement party at the bank today. I've been the security guard at the National Bank for forty-five years now darlin', just standing there in that dark lobby while I watch people with money walk by and ignore me. (Norman lets out a big belch.) But hell, the tellers had a little party for me today – even brought food – pizza, donuts, those little cheese things. One day, Vera. Just one more day and I am a free man, never to be caged in that depressing institution again.

VERA

I know Norm. (Vera heads toward the kitchen to get Norman's dinner.) Have you made any more decisions about what you want to do after you retire?

NORMAN

I think I should spend more time with you. You know, to keep you in line. (Norman chuckles in a nonjoking way. He puts out one cigarette and lights another cigarette.)

VERA

Norm (Vera walks back over to the couch and sits down.) I'm taking a

job. (She stands back up to be out of Norman's reach.) Now it's only part-time at the plant shop, but I start Monday and...

(Norman partially stands and grabs Vera's arm roughly. He pulls both of them back down to the couch.)

NORMAN

What the hell did you just say? (Norman continues to hold onto her arm with one hand while he takes his cigarette out of his mouth and holds it close to her cheek with the other hand.) I think I just heard you wrong. You know I don't want you working. You need to be home for me.

VERA

I know Norm, but I really want the job. During the day, there's not much for me to do, and you know how much I like plants. Couldn't I just try it?

NORM

You know what I think? (He stands up wobbly.)

VERA

I think we should change the subject. Mark called today. (Vera attempts to smile as she changes the subject.) He's teaching that new class at the university, the modern poetry one. He sounded happy about it on the phone.

NORMAN

Poetry? (Norman snorts and walks over towards the plants.) Poetry is

stupid bullshit. Are you sure he's not gay? What man likes that crap? I say give me the newspaper and a comfortable crapper to sit on. (Norman pauses for a moment as he reaches the plants. He puts his cigarette out in one of the plants.) Know what else is stupid? Your job. You're calling them tomorrow to tell them you changed your mind. Besides, I've had two heart attacks, and I need you to stay home and take care of me.

VERA

I'm taking the job, (Vera stands up and hobbles over to Norman. She puts her finger in his face.) and you're not going to ruin it.

NORM

You bitch! (Norman turns toward Vera's plants and savagely wipes them all off the plant stand. They go smashing in pieces and chunks across the floor.) If I tell you that you're not taking that job, you're not taking that job! (Norman roughly pushes Vera down and steps over her as he walks back to the couch.)

(Vera looks at her plants like they were her children who have just been murdered, particularly Daphne. She then slowly picks herself up and silently walks off to the kitchen. Norman lights another cigarette. Vera returns with his plate of food and sets it on the dining room table.)

VERA

Your dinner's ready. (Vera stands by the dining room table as Norman approaches the table and sits down.)

NORMAN

What is this? (Norman looks at his plate and pokes at the food with his fork.)

VERA

It's a new casserole I'm trying. It has beef and noodles and vegetables. (Vera walks back over to the plants and begins to pick up the mess.)

NORMAN

It better taste good. (Norman puts several bites into his mouth and eats them.) I don't believe it. (Norman says belligerently.) This stuff isn't bad. What's that spicy flavor in it?

VERA

Those are fresh herbs. It was a heart healthy recipe, so instead of a lot of salt, it called for fresh herbs. Do you want more? (Vera walks over to the table from picking up the plant mess and picks up Norman's plate.) I'll get it for you. (Vera disappears briefly in the kitchen and returns with a full plate for Norman.) Here you go. (Vera sets the plate down in front of Norm and resumes cleaning up the plant mess with a broom she has also brought from the kitchen.)

NORMAN

(Norman takes a few more bites of his food.) Sometimes Vera, there's actually a reason to keep you around. I like this shit. (Norman points to his food.) You should make it again sometime.

VERA

Sure Norm. I'll make sure and keep the recipe.

(Norman takes the last bites of his dinner as Vera finishes cleaning up the plant mess. When Norman is done, he gets up to go back to the couch. On the way, he grabs his chest and collapses.)

VERA

Norm! (Vera screams and runs over to him.) Norm! Get up! Oh my god! Oh my god! (Vera runs over to the phone and dials 911). Hello? 911? I need help. Hurry! My husband, I don't think my husband is breathing. He was walking and then...(Vera stifles back a cry.) Hurry! He's already had two heart attacks. Hurry! Please! Hurry! 311 Middleton Lane.

(Vera lets the phone drop and runs back over to Norman. He isn't moving or breathing. She begins to perform CPR on him the best she knows how. After a few minutes, the paramedics knock at the door and rush in with a gurney.)

VERA

Thank god you're here. (Vera gets up off her knees as the paramedics surround Norman and the first paramedic begins CPR on him.)

FIRST PARAMEDIC

Please stand clear. (The first paramedic points Vera away from Norman.

The other paramedic bends down and quickly assesses Norman too.)

SECOND PARAMEDIC

We're going to have to put the paddles to him.

(The second paramedic opens Norman's shirt. He lubricates the paddles, attaches them to Norman's chest, and pushes the button that makes Norman's body lurch as the electricity is pumped through him. Norman does not respond as the second paramedic rushes another electrical jump through him. He still does not respond. The first paramedic rolls the gurney next to Norman. The two paramedics load Norman onto the gurney quickly.)

FIRST PARAMEDIC

We better hurry up, or this one is a DOA. (The first paramedic continues CPR on Norman as the gurney is rolling toward the front door. The second paramedic gathers his things up and turns to Vera.)

SECOND PARAMEDIC

We're taking him to County General Hospital. You can meet us there.

(The two paramedics rush out of the door with Norman on the gurney. Vera stands there stunned for a moment. She then grabs her purse

and runs out the door too. The stage darkens.)

End of Act I, Scene I

ACT II SCENE I

(The setting is now a hospital waiting room where Vera waits alone. She has been waiting there for about three hours. Vera's son Mark rushes into the waiting room and sees his mother. He hurries over to her.)

MARK

What's going on? (Vera stands up. Mark and Vera embrace briefly. They then hold hands as they sit down on a waiting room couch.)

VERA

(She talks through tears.) Your father is on life support. He lost too much oxygen during his heart attack and he's (Vera puts a Kleenex to her nose and chokes back a cry.) brain dead. They want my permission to take him off life support, but I couldn't do it without talking to you. I don't know what to do, Mark. (Vera falls into Mark's arms and starts sobbing. Mark looks shocked and saddened by his mother's fear and confusion.)

MARK

You don't want him to live like a vegetable, Mom. You're going to have to let him go.

VERA

(Vera pulls back from Mark.) Are you saying that because you hated him?

MARK

We both know I hated him, and for good reason. Think about my childhood, everything I had to watch you go through. I never did understand why you stayed with him.

VERA

You needed a father Mark, and I couldn't raise you alone. Every boy needs to have a father.

MARK

Even when he's an abusive drunk? Just take a look in the mirror, mom. Your nose didn't get broken all by itself. Don't you remember how he did that to you or why? I do. (Mark stands up and starts to pace in agitation.) It was my seventh birthday, and he was mad that you made chocolate cake instead of white cake. Remember what he did next?

VERA

(She lowers her head and speaks softly.) I remember.

MARK

So do I. First he shoved my cake in your face. Then he followed it with his fist. For my seventh birthday, I got to see your blood splattered all over the dining room wall.

VERA

Don't you know the other reason why I stayed with him?

MARK

(He shakes his head.) I have never understood any of it, mom.

VERA

As long as I was there, he never laid a hand on you. (Vera stands up and hobbles over to Mark where he has been pacing and hugs him.)

MARK

He might as well have. (Mark is beginning to choke back tears himself). Look at how you walk. Let's talk about how he gave you that limp. It was the Fourth of July, right? Remember how you got on to him about shooting off bottle rockets. When you went back into the house, he followed you and threw that heavy wooden coffee table on you. Don't you remember how you suffered in bed for two months trying to recover from that? I was nine, mom, and I really thought you were going to die and leave me with him. (Mark pulls away from Vera.)

VERA

I couldn't leave Mark. You and I both know he would have followed me. There was no way to get away from him. Besides, being a security guard, he had too many cop friends that protected him. The only way I could protect myself (Pause) and you (Pause) was to stay.

MARK

I will never understand. He made your life hell for 39 years, and mine hell from the day I was born. (Mark sits back down and puts his head in his hands. Vera joins him.)

VERA

I'm sorry Mark. I'm so sorry. (Vera embraces him, and for a moment they cry together.)

MARK

(He regains his composure and looks up at Vera.) I love you, mom. I'll support whatever decision you make about Dad. No matter how bad he treated you, I know you loved him.

VERA

He wasn't always mean and drunk, Mark. When we were dating, he was actually very sweet. He brought me flowers all the time. He even called me "Daisy" because that was his favorite flower. That's how I got started in plants – from all the flowers and plants he used to give me. He didn't start drinking till his back problems started. You were just a baby, too young to remember, but he was in so much pain. (Vera shakes her head.) Eventually he turned to alcohol and it got out of control.

MARK

That still doesn't excuse him for hitting you.

VERA

(She grabs another Kleenex out of her purse and sits down.) I remember

the first time he hit me. It was about a month after he started drinking heavily. He was so frustrated that he couldn't go to work because he hurt so bad. I was helping him walk to the bathroom and he fell. When I tried to help him up, he smacked me in the face. We both cried afterwards, and he promised never to do it again. I believed him, at least until it happened again two days later.

MARK

Why didn't you leave then?

VERA

I was pregnant. (Mark looks surprised.)

MARK

You were what?

VERA

I was a couple of months pregnant. I always thought it was a girl, but I never got the chance to find out.

MARK

What happened to the baby?

VERA

I miscarried a month later when your dad threw me across the kitchen table and I fell over a chair.

MARK

(He gets up and begins to pace again.) Jesus Christ, mom. This just keeps getting worse and worse. I wish you wouldn't have told me that. You know what else I wish? (Mark stops in front of Vera.) I wish he wasn't my father. I wish he had never laid a hand on you, and I wish you had left him a long time ago. He murdered my brother or sister.

VERA

I cried at the time, but then I realized it was for the best. I couldn't bring another child into a situation that was spinning out of control. In the end, I think it was God's way of protecting my child.

MARK

It was Dad's way of killing your baby.

VERA

You haven't walked in my shoes, Mark.

MARK

Maybe not, but I was walking right beside you. The things that have scarred you have scarred me too. I felt so helpless growing up, watching him put you through hell, and watching you take it.

VERA

It's your lucky day then, Mark. You're never going to have to watch him hurt me again. If I tell them to turn off his life support, then it's all over. You can watch him die, plant him in the ground, and be done with him. That should make you happy.

MARK

It's not the ending I wanted, Mom. I wanted something happier – like him getting help and treating you the way you deserve to be treated.

VERA

Things don't always end the way we want them to, Mark. We both know that we're going to have to find peace with this situation within ourselves. Norman can't help us with that. He never could. (Vera pats Marks hand and stands up.) What we need to do now is go tell your father goodbye and talk to the doctors. I need your strength, Mark.

MARK

(Mark stands up and grabs Vera's hand.) This is going to be hard all the way to the end, isn't it?

VERA

Yeah, it is. (Vera wipes a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand. They walk hand in hand to go tell Norman goodbye and tell the doctors to take Norman off life support.)

(The stage darkens.)

End of Act II, Scene 1

ACT III SCENE I

(The setting is now the entry way of a funeral parlor where Norman's visitation has just ended. The only people remaining are Vera, Mark, Vera's brother Lyndon, Lyndon's wife Madeline, and the funeral director. Vera and Mark are standing in the entry way as the funeral director, Lyndon, and Madeline enter and walk over to Vera and Mark.)

FUNERAL DIRECTOR

I think things went very well this evening, don't you, Mrs. Iderson?

VERA

(Vera looks up at the funeral director, visibly distraught. She speaks meekly.) Yes. (She slightly nods her head yes.) Yes, it was fine.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR

I do have a couple of questions for you about seating for the funeral tomorrow. Do you have a minute before you leave to come back in the room and go over a few minor details with that? (Vera looks towards the room where Norman lies in his coffin.)

VERA

I can't go back in there right now. I'm sorry. (Vera limps over to a nearby chair and practically collapses into it.) I just can't look at Norman like that any more. (She shakes her head and looks down.)

LYNDON

We'll go, won't we, Mark? (Lyndon looks over at Mark.) I'm sure us guys can handle seating.

MARK

Sure, we can handle it. (Mark looks over at his mother who is trying not to cry.) You don't need to worry about it. (Mark walks over to his mother, kisses her on the head, and walks off stage with Lyndon. Madeline now walks over and sits by Vera)

MADELINE

Vera. (Madeline puts an arm around Vera.) You know that Lyndon and I are here to help you. I know it's going to be tough for you, but we'll help you, and Mark will help you, and you will get through this.

VERA

I don't know, Madeline. (Vera looks up at Madeline.) I've never felt worse in my life. At first I thought I was going to be able to handle this, but I don't think I can make it through the funeral tomorrow. All those people...talking to me, touching me, telling me everything's fine when it's not. Those people don't really have any idea.

MADELINE

Vera, you know how hard it is for Lyndon and me to run our gas station, especially now that we're getting older. Why don't you come spend some time with us and help us out? We could use a cashier. It would be good for all of us.

VERA

(Vera shakes her head no.) Thanks, Madeline, but I can't leave Daphne and the others. They need me just like I need them.

MADELINE

Daphne? Who's Daphne? You don't mean that plant do you? Can't you bring that thing with you?

VERA

No, Daphne wants to stay at home. It's peaceful there now.

MADELINE

Honestly, Vera, Lyndon and I are very worried about you, and I know Mark's beside himself about...

VERA

(Vera holds her hand up and interrupts Madeline.) I'm fine. Daphne and I have each other. I'm going to go ahead and start my new job next week, and Mark is only a phone call away.

MADELINE

We can't help worrying about you, Vera. We've always worried about you. All those horrible things that Norman did to you. (Madeline shakes her head.) I wish you would have let us help you. I'll never forget that time Norman got that knife and...

(Madeline is interrupted as Mark and Lyndon re-enter the room where

Madeline and Vera are sitting.
Madeline stands up as she sees
Lyndon. She then walks over to
stand by Lyndon.)

LYNDON

We got the seating problem all worked out for you, Vera. (Pause) Is there anything else I can do for you tonight?

VERA

(Vera looks up at Lyndon.) No, Mark will get me home, and I'm going straight to bed from there.

LYNDON

Vera, if you need anything, you let me know. (Lyndon and Madeline walk over to hug Vera and tell her goodbye. Lyndon and Madeline also hug Mark goodbye.)

MADELINE

We'll see you in the morning for the funeral. (Lyndon and Madeline exit the stage.)

MARK

Mom, are you about ready to hit the road too? I think we're done here for the night. (Pause) It was a nice visitation, wasn't it? Lots of people I hadn't seen in a long time, like Dad's friend, Otto. (Pause) It's hard to imagine those two growing up together, Otto, the rich jock, and Dad the poor nerd, best friends as kids.

VERA

Mark, before we can leave, I need to talk to you.

MARK

It's actually getting a little late, Mom. Can it wait until we get you home?

VERA

No, I need to tell you now.

MARK

Mom, you've had a very stressful day. Maybe we ought to just talk tomorrow. You seem to have had about all you can take for now.

VERA

No, it's important, Mark.

MARK

Alright, Mom. (Mark walks over and sits down beside her looking slightly worried and slightly confused.)

VERA

You know I love you, right Mark?

MARK

Of course, Mom. I love you too. Is that what you wanted to tell me?

VERA

No, not completely. I want to ask you something. (Pause) Do you think I'm a victim?

MARK

I'm not following you, Mom. A victim of what? Bad circumstances because you're now a widow?

VERA

No, Mark. I mean a victim of domestic violence.

MARK

Mom, you've been a victim of domestic violence for as long as I can remember. But at the same time, it was your decision to stay with Dad. I just wish I wouldn't have had to see all that stuff growing up. Do you know how awful it is to watch your mother be punched in the stomach or thrown over the furniture like a worthless rag doll?

VERA

Almost as awful as it is being the one punched, knowing your son is watching. I prayed every night you wouldn't turn out like him.

MARK

I knew I wouldn't turn out like him after watching how many times he beat the shit out of you. Do you know the very first time I remember him hitting you?

VERA

When?

MARK

It was late, the night we had the barbeque for Labor Day. I remember you were in the kitchen cleaning up and he walked in drunk. Remember how he shoved your head in the sink of dirty dish water and almost drowned you?

VERA

I remember it, but I had no idea you saw that. You were supposed to be in bed.

MARK

I was four, Mom, and I was sneaking down to the kitchen for a piece of leftover chocolate cake. I know why he did it too. He couldn't find his cigarettes. He tried to drown you because you wouldn't look for those damn things for him. The only reason he didn't kill you then was because he saw me walk into the room.

VERA

I had no idea.

MARK

Of course you wouldn't. By that time you were unconscious on the floor. You see, (Mark is now speaking with an angry tone.) not every kid gets to say, "I saved my mom's life when I was four. My Dad was trying to kill her."

VERA

It's over for both of us now, Mark. He'll never hurt me again, but I still need to talk to you about something else.

MARK

Is it about Dad?

VERA

It's about Dad and Daphne.

MARK

Dad and Daphne who?

VERA

You know Daphne. My plant at home that I've had for so long.

MARK

What does a plant have to do with anything?

VERA

Well, Daphne has been trying to tell me for a long time to get away from your father.

MARK

What? I think you lost me already. Your plant is talking to you?

VERA

More than that, Mark. (Tears of relief begin to flow down Vera's cheeks.)
Daphne told me what to do.

MARK

You mean Daphne said something like, "I'm thirsty, you need to water me?"

VERA

No, I mean Daphne said, "You need to get rid of him. He's about to retire and he's going to be home all day long every day to torture us."

MARK

Mom, now you're talking crazy. I think this day really has gotten to you.
You're not making any sense.

VERA

I'm making perfect sense. Daphne told me she could help me with
your Dad.

MARK

Help you do what?

VERA

Help me get rid of him.

MARK

I don't understand. You're telling me that you and your plant Daphne worked together to get rid of Dad?

VERA

That's what I'm saying.

MARK

Why are you telling me this? It's completely insane.

VERA

Daphne is poisonous. She is an Aconite. She may look pretty and flowery, but she's full of one of the most deadly plant toxins in the world.

MARK

Are you saying what I think you are saying? (Mark rises from his chair. Vera continues talking about Daphne.)

VERA

One milligram of Daphne's poison could kill a man, but I put in ten just to make sure. I knew it would be quick. He probably felt a burning sensation in his mouth first, then his throat went numb, and then...

MARK

(He is backing even further away from Vera in shock. He interrupts Vera.) I can't believe this. You killed him? You actually killed him?

VERA

You didn't let me finish. Death from Daphne's poison occurs from cardiac failure. It was all perfect. He'd already had two heart attacks. He was drunk that night and I served him a casserole "to die for." You should have seen him. He loved it. The ironic thing, (Pause) he almost looked happy for a moment while he was poisoning himself. I thought you would be proud of me for standing up to him.

MARK

(Mark sits down in a chair further away from Vera. His voice is only a notch below yelling.) Poisoning himself? He didn't poison himself. You poisoned him. You and that damn crazy plant of yours. And proud? (The funeral director walks back in.)

FUNERAL DIRECTOR

I thought I heard loud voices. Is everything alright in here?

MARK

Sorry about that. I just got a little emotional. It's been a very rough day. (Mark nods his head "yes.") But everything's ok.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR

Alright. (He begins to walk off stage.) But if you need anything let me know. I'll be downstairs in the office doing paperwork for a while, so you stay as long as you feel like you need to.

VERA

Thanks. (Vera now turns back to Mark.) Is everything really ok, like you just said?

MARK

(Mark looks surprised. He speaks angrily.) No, everything's not ok. First, I spend years watching my father beat my mother, and now I find out that my mother is a murderer. How screwed up is that? Why didn't you just leave him?

VERA

Because he would always find a way to torment me as long as he was alive. Mark, I just couldn't handle him after retirement. It was bad enough having him beat on me every night and every weekend, but during the day too? I just couldn't take it any more.

MARK

Why did you even bother to tell me? You didn't think I was screwed up bad enough before, so you thought you would put the icing on the cake?

VERA

Daphne and I thought we were solving a problem for everyone.

MARK

Would you please shut up about Daphne. You talk about that plant like it's a person. This is what too many years of bad choices has done to you Mom. The warm, kind-hearted person you were is now a cold-blooded murderer.

Drama

VERA

(She limps over to Mark.) I'm still that warm, kind-hearted person. I just did what had to be done.

MARK

You know that you could have come and stayed with me or with Uncle Lyndon and Aunt Madeline. You didn't have to kill him.

VERA

It needed to be done and you know it. Admit it. (Pause) It's a relief for everyone.

MARK

It's not a relief for me. What am I supposed to do now? Pretend you never told me what happened? The right thing to do would be to go to the police.

VERA

The police? (Vera looks shocked.) Now you're talking crazy. Why would you do that?

MARK

Mom, you don't seem to understand. You murdered a man in cold blood. Did you tell anyone else about this?

VERA

Albert knows. (Pause) So does Sandra, Dillan, and Patrick, but I don't think they'll tell anyone. They're usually pretty quiet.

MARK

(Mark appears completely frustrated.) Who are all those people?

VERA

Mark, they're the other plants. Albert the fern, Sandra the geranium, Dillan the pepper plant, and Patrick the butterfly plant. They didn't like Norm either, so they'll stay quiet. (Mark is shaking his head.)

MARK

You're talking so crazy right now, I'm not sure you even really did do it.

VERA

(Vera stands.) I did what had to be done.

MARK

So, the way I see it, my choices are limited. I can pretend I never heard what you said. I can call the police and have you arrested, or I can put you in a padded room where you'll probably talk to imaginary plants for the rest of your life.

VERA

You always said I deserved some happiness in life. Now I have it. I don't feel guilty any more since I told you what happened, and I want to go out

and live my life as a free woman. Daphne finally showed me the light, and now you, the new Mr. Righteous, don't think I deserve that any more?

MARK

At the expense of killing your husband? I just don't know, Mom, I just don't know. I guess we all have our own definition of justice, don't we? (Mark walks offstage and leaves Vera standing there.)

(The stage darkens.)

End of Act III, Scene 1

End of Play.

Index

Banks, Janet	35,36,37
Bond, Seyko	55
Brown, Lauren	33
Burks, Chandra	25,60
Crosbie, William	9
Esquibel, Matt	3
Fields, Rachelle	43,59
Findley, Rachel	50
Hasenauer, Victoria	26,29,30,72,73
Jackson, Aaron	42
Keithley, Amanda	39,40,41
Lewandowski, Lauren	18
Morris, Amy	44,45,77
Muturi, Simon	16
Nevels, Randy	49
Preno, Tayne	38,64
Weir, Nichole	46
Wiester, Keriann	11,48
Wise, Kathryn	8
Zicarelli, Nick	51

